

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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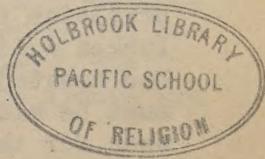
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THE SEXTON'S HOLY CALLING*

By the late Warren H. Wilson



We stopped in an Ohio hamlet and entered the church. On the steps was a tall man unknown to us, a stranger, who greeted the others as one well known to them, and discussed the conference to be held that afternoon and evening. Later I learned that he was the janitor. A man about seventy, hard of hearing and shortsighted; he had a farm on his hands as well, and shortly excused himself to go milk his cows. There was something of distinction about him even then that has fixed him in my memory ever since.

But there was an earlier impression, or rather a sight that has remained among my memories of that day. The opening of the door of the little old church showed me the aisle and the pulpit and the line of the pews. Everything glistened with care. Dust was nowhere, and all the dark woods were shining as from the hand of one who knew how to make the impression of reverent tending. The two impressions--of "Old John" and of his polished, well-ordered church furniture--belong together. Later he came back, and stayed through the whole gathering, an interested listener, but most solicitous over his two stoves. These were his pride and joy. He begged that no one in his absence should do anything to them, "unless," he confided to one of the older members, "you shet these drafts just a leetle."

It has been a weary hunt these many years for the sight of a good janitor of a country church. Such men are not common. Indeed, two causes make them to be scarce; and one is the fact that few country laborers believe in making the church better than their own home, so that it is difficult to get a good janitor if he is wanted. The second reason is that few congregations realize the importance of making the house dedicated to God a beautiful place.

There are many officers who will oppose the use of the church for socials or school-meetings; but few of these will pick up the litter of the previous Sunday before church and Sunday school assemble again; or will take the time to dust off the pews. They stoutly maintain that the house of God is too good for a farmers' institute, but are unwilling to make it clean from the dust that blows in from the farmer's fields.

*From RURAL RELIGION AND THE COUNTRY CHURCH by the late Warren H. Wilson. Reprinted by permission of Fleming H. Revell Company, Publishers. Appearing originally in 1927, this article has a real message for today. Dr. Wilson was the first Chairman of the Executive Committee of The Christian Rural Fellowship and was for many years Director of Town and Country Work for the Board of National Missions, Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.

It is no wonder that country people stay away from church--the young people and strangers, I mean--when the building is too often not heated until the congregation enters. Sometimes the windows are broken. Often the door stays open all through the week, and at times it is regarded as right to keep the church-house "common." I had a friend, pastor of a thriving hamlet, who set out to keep his church locked during the week. The nearest congregation of another denomination started a revival one week, and without asking permission, just as a matter of course, decided to use the pews of his church. He being away, they entered a window, and when he returned he found himself under criticism for the incident. It created more of a scandal for the door to be locked against thoughtless neighbors than ever the neglect of the house of God had created during the previous years. By the ideals of these people, religion must be made an earthy thing like the use of a barn. The house of God must be open for the tramp to enter and sleep, as well as for the casual preacher to enter and exhort in the interest of a division of the community.

I sometimes wonder whether such people as this have any godliness. Their religion is never above their own selves. They find it comfortable and easy to experience. For when one speaks on the ill condition of their house of worship, they say, or at least their preacher says--for such people never have a pastor: "Why, that is just the way the people live themselves." I have found it very difficult in such communities to extend the ideas of religion, since there is no welcome in their minds for anything better than themselves.

I contrast with this slovenliness of religion the state of the DuPage Church, the first time I came there to see Matthew Brown McNutt, the pastor. It impressed me as perfect in order and design on that Sunday morning, but very bare. The walls of the house of worship in particular were unadorned, and seemed to me plain. But as soon as the people began to come, many of them early, they laid away their outer wraps and went in to sit down in their accustomed places quietly. Then I saw that the loveliness I missed was given to the church interior by the people. When they were all present it seemed to be a beautiful place.

Coming from a Catholic church in Wisconsin, which had seemed to me excessively ornate yet engaging even to my austere Protestant eyes, I next Sunday visited a village church in Texas; and in the children's room in the basement I found the same effect--only adapted to a better intelligence. On all the walls, level with the eyes of small people, were orderly displays of pictures and cards. Not a square foot was bare and the whole was systematically displayed to catch childish eyes and accustom them to the symbols of Christian faith. No child or man could worship in the Catholic church, coming to it either out of the solid greens and browns of harvest or out of the solid white of winter, without receiving indelible impressions of that religion, its symbols, its saints and its sacraments. Neither could a Texas child sit for an hour, in the room devoted to teaching little people like him, without inheriting memories of the Holy Land and of the Saviour's childhood that would stay with him unto the end. In both cases there was a janitor of the building who kept all these furnitures of the imagination in order, that they might seem to be reverently cherished, just as the impressions they conveyed should be reverently thought upon all through later years.

Wordsworth remarks in a poem of his later years that he could not so vividly enjoy the sight of daffodils as he could in youth; but he found his memory of them as he lay upon a couch of contemplation to be as fresh and vivid as the first

impression. It is possible--indeed, in my observation it is probable--that some of the irreligion of our present generation of Americans is the result of the ungodliness of church buildings which "were no better than the houses of the people themselves." When religion is clothed in terms of humanity, and slovenly humanity at that, grown-up men and women cannot in later years look up to God; they must needs look down to shabby and unbeautiful worship.

Therefore I have come with years to believe that the sexton or janitor of a country church has a task even more spiritual than that of the preacher. His testimony is heard all the days of the week--or, rather, is seen. For all religion is communicated through the senses. All its communication ought, therefore, to be godly. By that I mean they should express something high and sacrificial. The church property should be maintained with scrupulous care. It should be always the best house seen upon the lands.

I talked with "Old John" in the Ohio hamlet after he had returned to the church with his best clothes on. He had been unwilling to stay for the afternoon service because he "was not dressed." The same tribute which he prepared in dusting and warming the church, until there seemed to be worshiping when the first person came to open the door, he required of himself. His working clothes, suitable for sweeping and making fires, were good enough to milk his cows in, but not for sitting in the session after the first hymn. He must come dressed, as the church was dressed, for the presence of God and the people. He told me, in answer to my inquiries as to his habits of caring for the building, that he kept the lawn always cut, and that his most anxious care was to keep the walk in front clean of the droppings of the birds in the trees and upon the porch. He had a weary but a satisfied mind, for he attained the perfection I had noted. He did not seem to be impressed by my praise, as if he had a standard of his own to which he was more attentive. And, indeed, a good janitor will not get much praise of people who see no godliness in a building. He has to feel in himself the approval of a task performed for the God of all Praise, or he will not attain godliness in the house of prayer.

I am well aware that it may be replied, the religion of buildings may go astray and come to nothing. Well do I remember a church in Illinois which had long been closed, as far as regular worship was concerned--though the countryside was full of people. Yet it was maintained in perfect order by the remaining members of the old families whose fathers built it. Their care never made them humane or evangelistic. So, indeed, the care of buildings may be fruitless. Yet what feature of religion, pray tell, cannot be so stultified? Preaching may become empty scholarly pride. The sacraments may degenerate into liturgy. Sunday schools may lose their teaching power. I plead for the sanctity of the building of worship and the spirituality of the office of janitor.

In an earlier time it might have been permissible to permit church buildings to be without care; but now, with standards of improvement on all sides, it is ungodly for a church building to be cared for no better than the homes of the people themselves. For it is obvious that what I am pleading for will be provided only by the better class of residents, those who have attained for themselves indoor plumbing and modern housing in many refinements of taste. Just as soon as their better houses arise the house of God becomes inferior, if it is not cared for in a better manner than that of the average dweller nearby. If there is godliness--that is, a sense of the greatness and goodness of God--in the neighborhood, it will assert itself in the demand for a better house for worship than the people have in most cases themselves.

I recall an instance of this fact in a New England town thirty years ago. There were three churches. The preceding generation had made money, and had laid

the foundation of fortunes that were still the best in the place. They rebuilt the one house of worship whose congregation still survives. The two churches which did not at the time rebuild have died. One building has been closed for five years, having been used during the preceding five only for funerals; the other has been long closed, and has now been transformed into a place of public entertainment. The spirit of worship was impossible even for poor people in a house neglected and not harmonious to the new standards of living. The house of God's worship had to be in fact--although none of these people were liturgical--superior to even the houses of the better-fixed of the families of the town.

I would suggest, therefore, as rules of the care of a church, in order that it may survive, the following:

First, it should have an employed janitor, a man or woman who has a sense of the religious use of the house, who will make it and keep it suitable to the religious sense not only of the neighborhood, but of all worshiping people everywhere, a suitable place of worship to Almighty God.

Second, the house should be kept heated long enough before the services of worship or assembly to be comfortable for the old, for the feeble or ill, so that they may sit without conscious inconvenience during a period of two or three hours at least.

Third, the house should be clean and in order at all times, in a degree harmonious with the taste and habit of the most exacting people of the world. The grounds should be simply parked, to convey the impression of care and affection, the shrubbery massed, grass cut and fences repaired. No local standard will do here. The religion of Christ is international and must show in its every expression the influence of the good taste of refined people of all countries.

It will appear from all this that the task of a church janitor is a divinely ordered one. He is to be chosen for his religious sense of duty, and for his recognition of the testimony to faith that can be rendered by wood and stone, by trees and lawns.

It is not inappropriate, therefore, that the minister himself should be the sexton. Indeed, he had better exercise his energies here than even upon his own premises. For if he has to choose he should prefer to make beautiful the place where God is said to dwell than to make comfortable that in which his wife dwells. His labors will bear fruit and if the church is to live the people will in time take from his hands the loving care of the church. But he had better have faith in his work with a broom and a mower than in his work with a pen or a typewriter--if he must choose. The one will be forgotten because it is of but a day, and he himself will go on after a time to be heard by other audiences but the church building and premises will stay and preach long after he has passed, and after the details of his message are forgotten.

Many churches are dying; and some of them are no longer needed. We all believe in the larger parish, with a radius of automobile travel instead of horse-haulage. It is my contention that among the determining tests to be met by those churches fitted to survive, in the strain under which all will fall in the coming years, those will remain and serve the coming generation whose buildings have had loving and reverent care. For, after all, reasons for the survival of a church must be found, not alone in the spirituality of a soul, but in the spirituality of wood and stone, of a membership competent and godly. There is a godliness of wood and stone, as there is of the human body.

The highest religious tribute paid to the body of man was paid in the comparison: "Your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit." Is it not proper, then, to embody holiness and godliness in the house in which men assemble to worship God, as an expression of the presence in wood and stone of the sacrificial spirit which is our highest revelation of the character of God? Is it not right for me to believe, who have grieved over the shabbiness of many little country churches, and over the ungodliness of the present generation that slovenly churches seen or attended in childhood leave the grown man indifferent to claims of the gospel and devoid of any standards of godliness?